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Fall 2020, Perspectives from International Students

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UNH Global

Surviving the Pandemic: The Student Experience

Kate Luksha

Wednesday, October 28, 2020

Boots up laptop.

Signs into Zoom. Waits...

Two friendly faces appear, and a lovely chat ensues.

This is the time we're living in. Meeting with each other via electronic devices. Fully dimensional human beings reduced to a flat square, our voices projected through crackling speakers. The picture grainy, the connection tentative and unstable. But we adapt. We make the best of it. And that's exactly what Norbert and Denisa Okolie, along with many other international students, have been doing. Adapting and making the best of a difficult and unprecedented situation.



Denisa and Norbert Okolie with baby Joy.

Norbert Okolie, originally from Nigeria, is pursuing his Doctorate in Materials Science. His wife Denisa, from the Czech Republic, just began her master's program in Justice Studies at UNH. Her one-year program will now be a hybrid of online and in-person classes. I met with them via Zoom to chat about their experience since the pandemic began in March and campus abruptly shut down.

I asked Norbert and Denisa what were their thoughts when the pandemic first hit and Norbert chuckled as he said, “When am I going to graduate?” A question I’m sure was on many students’ minds. How will this affect my education? In the beginning there were so many unknowns and very few answers. The Okolies encountered many challenges with Denisa applying to graduate programs and awaiting visa approval, and Norbert facing the prospect of losing all of his hard-fought research if he couldn’t get back to the lab. Not to mention having a toddler at home and Norbert’s mother, who was planning to stay with them to help take care of little Joy, was unable to come because of travel restrictions.

Trying to cope with so many changes at once was difficult at first. Plans had to be adjusted, expectations shifted. Denisa started her graduate program over the summer. She said, “It was extremely intense. It was three times a week, six hours on Zoom a day. So [Norbert] was with Joy while I was on Zoom, but he was supposed to be in the lab, so his research suffered.”

Given the limitations suddenly presented by the pandemic, sacrifices had to be made. Through it all, the Okolies remained optimistic, finding a positive in spending more time together as a family. Norbert noted that he was happy to experience more little moments with his daughter after missing many firsts, and he joked, “We’ve bonded so much that she actually likes me better than her mother now.”

Spending hour after hour cooped up at home can start to make you a little crazy if you don't find creative ways to fill your time. Some have started reading more, playing board games, baking, trying out new hobbies that might not otherwise have been realized. Norbert discovered he has a knack for fixing things. He shared, “I started fixing any electronic gadgets that I came across. I started fixing stuff around the house.”

Denisa found comfort in jogging, which became a daily ritual and welcome respite from her intense online program and the stress of pandemic worry. She shared, “I picked up jogging, one hour a day I would just go into the forest and just jog” as a way to cope. During this time, many have sought solace in nature as an outlet for their emotional frustration and quarantine fatigue. The Okolies have also enjoyed many walks in the woods and have hosted barbeques in the yard with a small group of close friends.



Norbert and one-year-old Joy.

Staying connected during this time can be difficult, but human connection is what feeds our souls and helps us get through tough times, knowing we have people in our lives we can lean on. Doug Bencks, an Architectural Planner at UNH, and his wife Mary signed up for the OISS Thanksgiving Host Program in 2016. During this time, Denisa was in Bulgaria finishing her bachelor's degree. She encouraged Norbert to sign up for the host program, so he wouldn't have to spend the holiday alone. He ended up spending that Thanksgiving with the Bencks family and since then, the Okolies and Bencks have spent countless occasions together, from holiday celebrations to baby showers.

The Bencks have become a major part of the Okolies lives, even babysitting Joy for them on Monday mornings when they both need to be in class. Norbert said of their connection, "I call them mum and dad because I see them as my parents, our family, not just our friends." Denisa adding, "They are absolutely amazing. Ever since [that first meeting] the Bencks invited him for Thanksgiving or Christmas or just major occasions where he would be alone otherwise."

I reached out to Doug and Mary for more insight into their connection with the Okolies and received a beautiful response from Mary that can only be shared in her own words:

"Doug and I were immediately charmed upon meeting Norbert about four years ago. His serious academic focus is balanced by an easy smile and quick sense of humor. Our lives are further enriched by the addition of Denisa, baby Joy and Norbert's mother, Patricia. We have shared family cookouts, Thanksgiving, beach walks, apple picking, a baby shower and more. Although we have never been to Nigeria nor Czech Republic, we feel a connection, heartstrings, to these countries through learning about Norbert and Denisa's lives. We are sometimes in awe of their determination,

resilience and optimism as they navigate academic achievements, at times living apart for months, and parenting precious Joy. It is truly a privilege to bond our families together.”

Connections like this aren't always borne out of these programs. They are the lucky ones. And when a crisis hits, it is bonds like these that help us get through. It's important to know there are people on your side to support you, especially when biological family is thousands of miles away undergoing their own quarantine.

I asked Norbert and Denisa if they had any advice they would give to new students who are now facing a completely different style of education than previously expected. Norbert stressed that having a close circle of friends is invaluable. “Without my friends I would have gone nuts. You can always talk to and confide in them if you need to let off steam or discuss ideas.”

He went on to say, “It’s a good opportunity to discover what your strengths are. I learned I could fix stuff and when I was getting stressed out that was my go-to.” He also shared this little nugget of wisdom, “Make do with what you have. Adapt to and make the best of what you have, because if you keep confining yourself to what you think you are best at, you will really end up with nothing.” Denisa echoed this sentiment, fresh off her first semester of online learning.

Norbert concluded by saying, “Ask, look for, seek.” Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Don’t be afraid to put yourselves out there and seek what it is you need to feel whole, to survive, to get through. We can find comfort in knowing we’re all in this together and we’re all just doing our best to get through.

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Doug Bencks, Norbert, and Mary Bencks at award ceremony for Norbert.

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